

Burnt out and grappling with grief and cancer, she now helps others build emotional literacy



Amrita Kaur

When Ms Angela Ng was in her 40s, she found herself caught on an endless treadmill of work, caregiving responsibilities, health struggles and bereavements, unable to step off.

This was 10 years ago, and since then, she has come up with a book on emotional literacy and an adult board game about emotional well-being to help others cope with similar challenges.

Back in 2014, she was burnt out in her job as a media director for the Asia-Pacific region at a French multinational company. She was also occupied with taking care of her father, who was bed-bound from a stroke and starting to develop dementia.

Around the same time, she was diagnosed with endometrial can-



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MS ANGELA NG, recalling the time in 2015 when she was asked to move to Hong Kong for work shortly after her father died. Hoping to help others achieve emotional awareness, she self-published the book *What Colours Are You Feeling?* in 2019

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(From far left) Ms Ng, with Singapore Institute of Technology students Amirah Ahmad Khairy, Hunter Lua and Stephanie Suteja, playing a board game she created on emotional well-being. ST PHOTOS: AZMI ATHNI

cer. She underwent surgery to remove 14 tumours in her womb in 2015. All were non-cancerous except one, which was treated with hormone therapy.

That same year, her father died, as did an uncle she was close to. Two days after her father's cremation, she was instructed to move to Hong Kong for work.

"There was no time to grieve. Work expected me to continue to function at 120 per cent no matter what hap-

pened to my health or family," says Ms Ng, who is now 50 years old and married to an IT professional.

She had found herself in the same situation when her mother died in 2006.

"My boss told me to move to Beijing to take over the management of the office there, two weeks after my mother died. I was much younger then and had no awareness of emotional health," says Ms Ng, who has no children.

With each bereavement, she realised she was going through emotional labour – suppressing one's emotions to function professionally and competently at work – and had lost her ability to grieve.

While reflecting on her struggles, she became interested in understanding and processing her emotions and helping others achieve emotional awareness and literacy too.

In 2018, she completed a post-

graduate diploma in positive psychology at The School of Positive Psychology in Singapore. This was followed by a master's in applied positive psychology with Anglia Ruskin University in Britain in 2020.

Unlike traditional psychology that focuses more on the causes and symptoms of mental illnesses and emotional disturbances, positive psychology emphasises traits, thought patterns, behaviours and experiences that are forward-looking and seek to improve the quality of a person's life.

In 2019, she self-published a book titled *What Colours Are You Feeling?*. It uses colours to express emotions, in order to help children and adults build emotional literacy to convey their feelings better. It has sold over 700 copies and contains activities designed to build hope, optimism and mindfulness to help regulate emotions.

"I think the younger generations are more emotionally literate and aware than the Gen Xers and millennials," she observes. "There is a gap that parents need to fill to relate to and communicate well with their children. All good practices and habits start and can persist only at home, not at schools."

Together with Chemistry Team,

a local design consultancy firm, she also created the Emotional Baggage Board Game in 2022. It addresses emotional well-being issues and aims to normalise difficult and emotional conversations at work.

This all came about when she decided in 2015 to pursue her childhood ambition of becoming a teacher. Despite her tight work schedule at the French company, she jumped at the opportunity of becoming an adjunct lecturer.

She would take leave on Mondays to teach marketing communications modules at Nanyang Polytechnic, before flying back to Hong Kong the same day, where she was based for her job. A year later, she quit her job to focus on teaching.

She joined Singapore Institute of Technology as a full-time lecturer in 2021, teaching the university's Digital Communications and Integrated Media degree programme.

For her career transition, she received the Singapore: 40-over-40 award from Minister of State for Manpower Gan Siow Huang in November 2023.

Singapore: 40-over-40 celebrates women who have taken risks and faced challenges to embark on a new career, try a new path or start a business after their

40th birthday.

Transitioning from the corporate world to academia and embarking on a new career as a lecturer after 40 was intimidating, says Ms Ng. It meant letting go of the comfort and financial security she had enjoyed in her previous job.

"Moving from a leadership role in which I managed others to reporting to younger colleagues with more experience has been a significant shift. It posed challenges, but also reinforced that age isn't the sole measure of expertise and encouraged me to value everyone's contribution."

After her brush with cancer, she also changed the way she lived. Ms Ng, who goes for medical checks every six months, exercises more and prepares her own food more often now. She also makes it a habit to meditate daily.

She is currently pursuing a PhD in applied psychology at University of Reading in Britain and is the oldest candidate in her cohort.

She reflects: "I live more in the present and am more intentional in how I spend my time and with whom. Moving from Fomo (fear of missing out) to Jomo (joy of missing out), I think I now appreciate a quieter life where I can savour life more fully."